CRUMB IN EXILE

Robert Crumb's self-image continues to deteriorate. On the cover of the first issue of **SELF-LOATHING COMICS** [Fantagraphics Books, 1995], the ultimate public confessor stares at himself in the mirror, obviously quite horrified at the reflection of his aging self. Born in 1943, Crumb is 52 this year. In his half of this 32-page book, Crumb details his current lifestyle in the small French town where he lives as an expatriate with his wife, Aline, and daughter, Sophie. Awakening from a dream about a visit to a haunted castle with his family, Crumb stays in bed reminiscing about his sexual experiences with groupies of yesteryear. If you have followed his graphic career over the years, you will recognize the women Crumb refers to, if not, no matter, because this is another of those husband and wife jams Crumb began in the seventies when Aline had a bum leg and the duo drew a couple of issues of **DIRTY LAUNDRY** to get themselves past her convalescence. **SELF-LOATHING** is a comic book for insiders, not for newcomers and even those obscessed with the minutia of Crumb's personal life are likely to stifle a yawn in this tedious book. It was outrageous when Crumb drew his character taking a leak on the cover of **YOUR HYTONE COMICS** in February of 1971 because no cartoonist had even done such a cover, but post-Mapplethorpe, the same drawing becomes mundane. Drawings of Crumb fixing his sink or washing the dishes or sitting in front of an empty drawing board are SIMPLY BORING, BOB! Though the flipside of this comic has a more interesting cover drawing by Aline, her half is as tiresome and tedious as Crumb's.

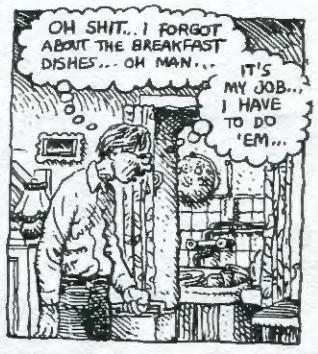
The attitude of the Crumbs seems to be that everyone is insatiably curious about the intimate details of their lives, so they will satisfy this curiosity in a three dollar comic book, and, while there was an element of truth in that assumption circa 1969, it is no longer true. Today's Ninja Turtle or Power Ranger fan could care less about Crumb's French ennui. Back in the sixties [a title of a Crumb story], readers were fascinated with the comix of R. Crumb or R. Scum, because it was unrepressed and El Crumbo was blatantly honest about his macabre sex fantasies. The Henry Miller of underground comix, he told it all and it was true. None of his peers revealed the same honesty or directness in their art; all hid behind their characters or stayed off-panel entirely. Who is going to admit to having fantasies about living in a woman's anus? Crumb in **BIG-ASS COMICS**. Who's going to admit having a fantasy about getting it on with his entire family? Crumb in his most often busted story, "Joe Blow," in **ZAP** 4. Crumb made his rep by refusing to censor himself in any way at all. He fought with the feminists early on, telling them if they didn't like what he drew, they could fuck off, because he was going to draw anything he goddamned pleased. In the final issue of **WEIRDO**, a neo-**MAD** style mag Crumb edited in the mid-eighties, he outraged everyone with stories about when the "Niggers" and "Nazis" take over America. His early drawings of black people in **ZAP** circa 1968 were considered racist, because he drew in a thirties cartoon style in those days; later when he did the research for his stories and drawings of Delta blues musicians, he was praised for his autheticity. All of Crumb's early work, incidentally, is available chronologically in **THE COMPLETE CRUMB** [Fantagraphics Books, 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115]. There are ten volumes extant.

In the sixties, Crumb was the ultimate gadfly. Strongly influenced by S. Clay Wilson, a fellow **ZAP** artist who told him he shouldn't hold anything back, Crumb began to open up in his comic stories; taking LSD for the first time in 1965 caused him to overflow and for nearly a decade the ex-Catholic cartoonist produced more single-handed comic books than any other artist in the history of the medium. He invented characters in seconds and put them through their paces in strips and stories. Mr. Natural, Flakey Foont, Angelfood McSpade, Bo Bo Bolinsky, the Sewer Snoids, Honeybunch Kominski, the Vulture Demonesses--Crumb's list could go on for pages. Donald Fiene, associate Professor of Russian at the University of Tennessee, published his **CRUMB CHECKLIST** in 1981, printing pictures of over a hundred characters Crumb had invented and before his book was printed the cartoonist had created a couple dozen new ones.

While he let it all hang out in his comic art, Crumb did not like to be bothered with people, particularly press people and folks with schemes that required him to use his talent to promote them. He wasn't inspired to draw things other people wanted him to draw, hence he rejected offers from numerous magazines. But fame had its way with him. He gave in and allowed Ralph Bakshi to make an animated film out of his **FRITZ THE CAT** stories [published in **CAVALIER** in 1965, and collected by Ballantine in 1968], but he hated the final result and took his revenge by having Andrea Ostrich kill Fritz by stabbing him in the back of the head with an ice pick [in **THE PEOPLE'S COMICS**, a book Crumb gave to his friend, Terry Zwigoff, as a favor during the short period when Zwigoff was into being a publisher]. To deal with all the people constantly trying to get to him, Crumb moved to the country and began to interview himself, publishing these graphic interviews in mags like **HIGH TIMES**. The more Crumb tried to hide, the more people chased after him. He didn't want to be an editor and make decisions about other people's art and writing and, after Wilson and others joined in on **ZAP**, he distanced himself from the project, contributing a story every couple of years, but refusing any deeper involvement. In the eighties, he gave in and agreed to edit **WEIRDO** for Ron Turner at Last Gasp Comix, but he found he felt no different about editing than he had when he was younger and before long he passed the job on to Peter Bagge and took off for France.

He had virtually the same experience with music. For awhile he played banjo and sang old twenties and thirties songs with Dodge, Armstrong, and Zwigoff in The Cheap Suit Serenaders, but when it came to touring with the band, making it something more than a hobby, Crumb opted out. He felt too exposed, too public. People came up to him after the gigs and wanted too much of him. In the mid-seventies he was still suffering from the trauma of the Entertaining Comics Convention he had attended in 1972. He had gone to New York, because **MAD** and **HELP!** editor Harvey Kurtzman pressured him into it. Once there, he was mobbed by fans who had seen his strips in underground papers and read the first few issues of ZAP. The experience terrorized Crumb. It was too much. He couldn't take all that adoration. He stayed away from comic conventions after that.

Crumb's **ZAPS** are still in print; indeed, **ZAP** has been in print longer than any other comic book, which means Crumb has to deal with reactions to artwork he did when he was



Clay Geerdes **COMIX WAVE 160**
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BACK IN HIS "ATELIER"
I FINALLY GOT ALL THE GOOD JULES HERBUVEAUX RECORDS EXCEPT "HAVIN' LOTS OF FUN," WHICH I'VE ONLY HEARD ON TAPE...
I LOVE THIS BAND!
IT'S ALMOST NOON ALREADY! SO NOW, WHERE WAS I??

young. The 52-year-old man who drew **SELF-LOATHING** is a pale shadow of the young cartoonist who used his pen to deflate everything from his father's inflated ego to Mansonesque hippie gurus and rock stars, nevertheless, he has to answer to young people who have just discovered his graphic sex fantasies and are curious about the personality and character of someone who could *think* about such things let alone have the nerve to draw and publish them.

But the young Crumb looked outside himself as much as he did within and for nearly two decades he functioned as one of America's sharpest satirists. The older Crumb appears to have withdrawn. Hiding in a small town in France where he chose to move to protect his daughter from the violence of contemporary America, Crumb has no more to say than anyone else in a comparable situation. His daughter, Sophie, comes across as the most interesting character in **SELF-LOATHING**, but she is only shown reacting; Crumb does not move into her life, show her at school, or give any indication what it is like for her to live in exile in France. He does indicate the beginning of what will develop into a more serious conflict in the future by having Sophie correct his amateurish French. At twelve, she is probably already comfortable with a language Crumb has yet to master. He casts himself as a not-so-innocent abroad, a rather lazy middle-aged man whose wife clearly rules the roost, but what shows through this comic book attempt is the artist's lack of interest in the project. The reader who wants to see a better side of the elder Crumb should have a look at his illustrations for a recent collection of stories by Franz Kafka.

And if you want to laugh and enjoy yourself, go back and read the early issues of **ZAP, MOTOR CITY,** and **BIG ASS!**

Well, Scoop Nisker defines himself as a hippie [p. 70] in his autobiography **IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE NEWS, GO OUT AND MAKE SOME OF YOUR OWN,** but after telling about a commercial he put on KSAN for a negative-heel shoe chain, he wrote: "Some say they felt 'laid back' while wearing them, while others report feeling more like one of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers in the famous 'truckin' cartoon--in a kind of perpetual strutting mode [136]." Sorry, Scoop, but no cigar. Those truckers were drawn by Robert Crumb and the poster was made from a drawing in one of his sketchbooks. Crumb liked old radio and he recalled a disc jockey signing off with 'keep on truckin'. The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers were drawn by Gilbert Shelton for a comic strip first run in the Los Angeles **FREE PRESS** in 1968 and they were not related to Crumb's truckers. Actually, truckin' was a figure in a dance called the Big Apple. It was faddist in 1937 when **LIFE** ran a picture.

You get the latest **WHITE BUFFALO GAZETTE** from Steve Willis, POB 390, McCleary, WA 98557-0390. $1.55 pp. Add half a buck more and get the new Maximum Traffic minicomic **SKINNED ALIVE BOY #4.** Willis is handling some of my old CW stuff, so ask for his catalog. To get some of Max's own minis, send him a couple of bucks at POB 2452, Butler, PA 16003. He'll include a list of his latest stuff. He may still have a few copies of the 100th issue of his **OBSCURO ARTISTS 1994** sampler. Wrote Max: "I have a keen admiration for the humor and courage of the Yippie scene. I was sure it would change America for the better...but, alas, we are ever more & more becoming a total police state controlled by the rich. Almost all the press I've seen on Rubin was a bit scathing and condescending. I think they mean to write the underground culture right out of existence [ltr to me, 1/95/95]." Well, sure they are, Max, but given the number of people who collected all that hippie/yippie stuff, it won't be all that easy to do. A number of libraries, like Berkeley's Main, have microfilm films of underground newspaper collections and there are a couple of dozen books out now that give pretty detailed historical info re Haight-Ashbury, the East Village, and other subcultural seed pods. I read Joel Selvin's memoir of the acid rock scene, **SUMMER OF LOVE** [New York, Dutton, August, 1994] and it tells it like it was; rich white punks on dope. Lots of folks have never known that ultra-hip musicians like Grace Slick and Steve Miller and David Crosby came from wealthy families; Selvin's analysis of the music business reveals far more wealthy kids at play than rags to riches runaways with cheap guitars and talent. It's an ideal buster so if you love some of those sixties groups, avoid the book. Remember what T. S., Eliot said: Mankind cannot stand too much reality.

An animator I have known and respected for many years sent me this information: "I have come to believe that it is utterly impossible for anyone--regardless of how eminently qualified--who does not happen to be a family member or close personal friend of the Hollywood Power Elite, to get Hollywood financing of any kind, especially for animation. The current state of Hollywood proves that. At virtually every major Hollywood live action studio today animation is being financed, but nowhere are any qualified people in charge of it; instead, at virtually every studio, the people in charge are so totally ignorant of the basic animation process, and of animation history, that they feel compelled to admit it, to spare themselves even greater personal embarassment." Well, looking at the top-grossing films in the latest World Almanac, one wonders how anyone but Spielberg, Lucas, and a couple of others can get financing for any project.